

# John the Savage

## Character Analysis

### John's Different Worlds

John is like a morality sponge. He picks stuff up everywhere he goes. From Shakespeare to the Bible to the creation myths of the Reservation to the stories he hears about the civilized world – John's conscience is an equal opportunity employer. While this makes for a great social experiment, it's incredibly difficult on the poor guy. For John, life is a problem of reconciling different worlds.

And, as we've come to expect, Huxley makes this pretty explicit for us. There's a great paragraph in Chapter Eight in which John mashes these different realms together, and it ends with this: "Lying in bed, he would think of Heaven and London and Our Lady of Acoma and the rows and rows of babies in clean bottles and Jesus flying up and Linda flying up and the great Director of World Hatcheries and Awonawilona." Already you've got Christianity, Native American religion, and the "civilized" world mixed up in his mind as equally real or equally mythic. John can't draw a line between the indisputable *reality* that is the World State and the various religious *beliefs* he has picked up.

It gets even more complicated when we add Shakespeare to the mix. Check out this passage from Chapter Eleven. The station master boasts that the Bombay Green Rocket can move at "twelve hundred and fifty kilometers an hour," to which John replies: "Still, Ariel could put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes." Now he's mixing up the *actuality* of technology with the fiction of literature. Or did you notice that, in times of distress, John turns either to Shakespeare or to Zuñi to express himself? More mashing up of different worlds.

It's easy to see how this happened; John grew up hearing myths of the World State just as he heard stories of Jesus or Awonawilona or Shakespeare's characters. If anything, finally seeing the "other place" with his own eyes probably makes it more difficult for him to treat Shakespeare or religion as myth. After all, hasn't he just proven to himself that mythical worlds exist?

Part of the reason that reality is so messy for John is that he's carrying a big burden. Somehow or another, his character ends up representing Jesus, John the Baptist, Othello, Hamlet, Romeo, Juliet, and the epitome of the Noble Savage. (The Noble Savage = a grand concept and term that gets thrown around a lot in literary criticism circles. The idea is that that man in his natural state, untouched by modernity and technology, is somehow more pure and less corrupted than the civilized man.) But let's start with the Shakespeare.

### John and Shakespeare

*The Tempest* really warrants the biggest discussion here, since it features most prominently in *Brave New World* (titles are a big giveaway). In fact, we think if you really wanted to, you could probably read the novel as a twisted parody of Shakespeare's play.

In case you haven't read *The Tempest*, it goes something like this: Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been exiled on an island with two spirits: the mostly good Ariel and the generally bad Caliban. Prospero knows magic, so he shipwrecks a boat full of his enemies on the island. Miranda, who's never seen a man before other than her father, falls in love with the first one she sees, Prince Ferdinand, and they spend the whole play trying not to have sex with each other before they get married. She's the one who delivers the line, "Oh brave new world, that has such people in it," when she sees all the men who have been shipwrecked on her island.

If you want to see *Brave New World* as a parody, John is like Miranda, because he's faced with a whole new world that holds largely sexual temptations. In a way, he's also like Ferdinand, what with being a man and all, which makes Lenina a promiscuous version of the virginal Miranda. Prospero is the authority making all this happen, so he's analogous to either a very absent God or a very present Mustapha Mond. As for the tricky little spirits, Helmholtz seems benevolent and serves John well, so you could say he is like Ariel. On the other hand, Bernard, who totally lets his friend down, is more like Caliban. (Bernard is even physically deformed a little bit, just like Caliban.)

The other Shakespeare plays provide similar analogies for John's life. Thinking about *Othello*, for example, John is much like the character of Othello, a man somewhat isolated from others because of his different skin color. (Othello was a black man in a white world, John is white and grew up on a Native American reservation). We actually can't take credit for this connection, since Huxley does it himself.

*Hamlet* is a great connection, too. In this play, Hamlet hems and haws about possibly murdering his stepfather Claudius, who is sleeping with his (Hamlet's) mother Gertrude. Similarly, John hates and thinks about killing Popé, the man sleeping with his (John's) mother. Many scholars ascribe Hamlet's behavior to an Oedipus Complex, which later we'll argue John has himself.

You've also got Romeo and Juliet: two lovers from different families = two lovers from different worlds. John and Lenina often reverse these roles in some great instances of gender-bending. We're covering the big connections here, but of course there are many other fun things to say about John and the remaining Shakespearean works quoted in *Brave New World*.

So far all our Shakespeare discussion has been a removed look at what trickery Huxley was up to when writing. But what does Shakespeare actually mean to John? Does he get all these connections? You could argue either way. On one hand, yes, John gets it. He relates the racism in the feely *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* to that he saw in *Othello*. He imagines himself as Romeo and Lenina as Juliet. He gets the new world connection with *The Tempest* – why else would he so aptly quote Miranda?

On the other hand, John doesn't get it all. He doesn't make the connection between the racism he suffered and Othello's. Nor does he see that Lenina is actually the farthest thing from the virginal Juliet we could imagine. Most importantly, he doesn't get that the "brave new world" line is incredibly steeped in sexuality. He seems to be missing the (Freudian) point.

If this is true, boy, are we in trouble. If John mindlessly quotes Shakespeare without understanding the rationale behind it, what is *King Lear* than simply more hypnopaedia? John wasn't indoctrinated in his sleep, but the lessons he has imbibed are equally unreflective. John even admits this, a little bit, himself: "These words and the strange, strange story out of which they were taken (he couldn't make head or tail of it, but it was wonderful, wonderful all the same)—they gave him a reason for hating Popé; and they made his hatred more real; they even made Popé himself more real." Uh-oh. If you need more evidence, check out Chapter Seventeen, when Mustapha asks John if he knows what a philosopher is, and John responds with a definition taken obscurely and somewhat out of context from *Hamlet*: "A man who dreams of fewer things than there are in heaven and earth." Many scholars use this line as proof that John is clueless.

## John and Love. And Freud. And Oedipus.

Attractive blondes aside, John at least understands that his angsty, impassioned love for Lenina is like something out of Shakespeare. Unfortunately, it's also something out of Greek Tragedy and the depths of man's darkest thoughts. It's heavy stuff, so we'll ease into it.

The first thing we all have to ask is, "John, WHAT are you thinking?" As readers, we definitely have that moment akin to calling out your best friend for dating the class player. For John, principled man of virtue and pillar of chastity, falling for an extremely promiscuous woman isn't reasonable. So we have to look for an explanation as to why he's so attracted to her.

### **Possible Reason #1: Lenina is white.**

**Scandal Rating: Politically incorrect, but doesn't send us running for the hills.**

John makes it pretty clear to Bernard that he's spent his whole life being lonely. Actually, come to think of it, he pretty much says straight up, "Hey, I've spent my whole life being lonely. You too!? No way!" Part of the reason for his isolation is that he looked different than the rest of the boys on the Reservation. He even fell in love with one of the young women (Kiakimé), which ended quite tragically when she married someone else (presumably of her own skin color). (We're pretty sure we're not just reading into this, either, since Huxley explicitly comments on Othello and his race-related connection to John.) What we're getting at here is that when John sees Lenina, his little lonely heart doesn't just say, "Look! A girl!" It says, "Look! A white girl!" Lenina is John's ticket out of solitude, so he falls in love with her.

### **Possible Reason #2: John wants to sleep with his mom.**

**Scandal Rating: Off the charts.**

Yes, we are going down this road. In a novel with S&M orgies, sexual propriety isn't really an option. So what we're going with here is that Lenina is John's mother – in a metaphorical sense. Start with their names: Linda, Lenina – notice the phonetic similarities? (Again, since Huxley is so big on names, we can't ignore them at all, ever. See "Character Clues" and you'll know what we're talking about.) While we don't know for sure about Lenina's caste, all signs point to her being a Beta (check out her "Character Analysis" for more info), as is Linda. Both came to the Savage Reservation with Alpha men they were "dating" at the time. Both worked with bottles. Both are material-obsessed and all too happy to fulfill their roles as sexual objects. Linda really is Lenina with years attached.

It's not just us thinking this way; John, too, makes connections (though not conscious) between his mother and his would-be lover. When he can't stop thinking about Lenina in Chapter Eighteen, he distracts himself by thinking about...his mom. He's mixing up in his mind thoughts of Linda's death with images of Lenina naked. Crazy. Huxley connects these two events structurally, too, since Linda's death is what draws John away from the naked Lenina scene, much to Lenina's disappointment. The point we're putting up for discussion is that John wanting to sleep with Lenina is a manifestation of his subconscious desire to sleep with his mother.

This is nothing new. Freud put it all into words, but it goes all the way back to *Oedipus the King*, a play by Sophocles which lends its name to Freud's theory. In Sophocles's play, a man named Oedipus accidentally kills his father and sleeps with his mother. (He doesn't know that they're his parents. It's a long story. But you can Shmoop it.) Afterwards, when he realized what he's done, he gouges his eyes out and blinds himself. Freud's theory is that every man secretly wants to do this.

John makes a good case. He tries to kill Popé, who is as close as he's going to get to a father figure. Then, because his mother is dead and he can't sleep with her, he (very likely) sleeps with Lenina, whom we've already established as a stand-in for Linda. But now comes the cash-in morning-after moment: "The sun was already high when he awoke. He lay for a moment, blinking in owl-like incomprehension at the light; then suddenly remembered – everything. 'Oh, my God, my God!' He covered his eyes with his hand."

Ahem! "Owl-like" incomprehension? He "cover[s] his eyes"? Sounds like Oedipus. We think we've said enough about that.

### **John's Suffering and the Bible (Related? Yes, indeed.)**

Speaking of people that poke out their own eyes, let's talk about John's penchant for self-mutilation. Since the guy is purging and whipping himself left and right, there must be an explanation somewhere.

## ***Possible Reason #1: John is rebelling against the World State***

It's pretty clear that John is NOT a fan of civilization. So clear, in fact, that John just says as much in Chapter Sixteen. He's disgusted by its methods, horrified by its lack of humanity, and all around *pissed off* when they try to restrict him to their rules. What's a man to do? Fight back. Unfortunately, when the ground rules are "Be happy all the time," the only way to break these rules is to be miserable. So that's what John does. He makes himself suffer to prove that he's not under the yoke of the World Controllers.

## ***Possible Reason #2: Sex and violence go together in the World State.***

The World State is definitely a static middle ground for any sort of emotion. People are content and happy, but there's no real joy. (If you want to argue with us, you should use that paragraph at the end of Chapter Five that describes Fifi Bradlaugh.) Citizens may be irked once in a while, but no one is ever really angry. The extremes of feeling have been reduced to a plateau that is the very absence of emotion.

The logic that follows, then, is that to have one extreme – real pleasure – one has to have the other – real pain. In the World State, these translate, as far as we can tell, to sex and violence, the two extremes of passion. Now, from reading your book, you'll know that sadism and masochism figure in big. Look at the oddly placed bits of violence in the highly sexual media that is "the feelies": along with the sensation of a kiss is a bang on the head. Then you've got Linda's first sexual encounter with Popé, where John ends up getting abused. In Bernard's Solidarity Service, a woman's implied orgasm is described "as though she were having her throat cut." When Lenina grabs John (in the sexy way), she drives her nails into his wrist. The biggest connection is the climactic scene, when the mass orgy goes down with an unhealthy dose of group flagellation.

John himself is responsible for this correlation in *Brave New World*. The novel seems to argue that, to have one, you need to have the other. But John doesn't want sex anyway – so why all the violence? One explanation is that John keeps punishing himself for thinking sexual thoughts. (See the scene where he dives into a bush of thorns to stop thinking about Lenina's naked body.) If he's angry at Lenina, it's really just misdirected anger at himself for not having more mental restraint. The second explanation is that John self-mutilates because that's the closest he's going to get to sex. In a way, the extremes of violence are akin to the extremes of orgasm – both are intense feelings which, in a world of emotion-less nothingness, are as close as John can get to being human.

## ***Possible Reason #3: John is a devoutly religious man.***

John himself states that God is "a reason for self-denial." OK...what does that mean? Basically, John believes in the soul. (Bernard tells Mustapha as much in his written report.) He's concerned with what's going to happen to him after death. Without God, without the soul, there would be no reason to do anything but indulge in this mortal life. But with God, with the soul, there's a reason to struggle now for the benefit of the long-term.

Christianity, in particular, or at least some forms of Christianity, promote suffering as a necessary part of life. If everyone should strive to be more like Jesus, and Jesus suffered willingly, it follows that we should all...stand out in the sun without arms outstretched like Jesus on the cross? Well, John certainly thinks so.

The Christ imagery surrounding John's character isn't exactly subtle, either. First of all, he directly tries to be Jesus. A lot. Without hiding it. You've also got Lenina driving her nails into his wrists (a sexual perversion of the crucifixion, by the way), and John diving into the thorny bush in Chapter Eighteen. In fact, we bet if you really wanted to, you could write an essay about the five wounds of Christ and *Brave New World*.

Aside from the Jesus stuff, there's also a lot of John the Baptist references, mostly because of John's name. In the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist goes out to chill in the desert. A bunch of curious spectators

follow him. In this case, seclusion in the desert = seclusion in the lighthouse. John the Baptist is killed because a sexy woman demanded as much, and Lenina, pretty sexy herself, causes Huxley's John to kill himself.

Which brings us, *finally*, to John's death. With all the animal imagery running amok in this novel (see "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory"), one of John's main concerns is to keep himself human, not animalistic. Since suffering is one of the ways he maintains his humanity, it might be that his death is the ultimate "I am a man!" statement, especially seeing as it comes after all those animalistic terms used in the orgy scene.

But while one interpretation says that suicide is the ultimate suffering, another interpretation is that suicide is the ultimate *end* to suffering. John can't deal with his guilt over having sex with Lenina, so he kills himself. It's distinctly possible that John is, in a word, escaping. The way you interpret John's death has a lot to do with the message you take away from *Brave New World*. Maybe it's optimistic: John achieves freedom in a way that, alive, he never could have. Maybe it's pessimistic: the one chance the individuals of the World State had for freedom died along with John. So which is it?